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SPECIAL REPORT

Critique of Republican Portable Grants

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Critique of Republican Portable Grants

Portable Grants Eliminate Accountability for Better Student Achievement

The Republican education bill includes Senator Gregg's "child-centered program," which allows Title I funds for disadvantaged children to be used as a voucher. Called Title I "portable" grants, this program would fundamentally change the nature of Title I. Portable grants would drain resources from poor public schools; abandon disadvantaged students; send out Federal education funds with no accountability for their use; and undermine current school reform.

The Republican Portable Grant Proposal

Title I, the cornerstone of Federal elementary and secondary education, is a program that provides funding for supplementary educational services for disadvantaged students. Schools with a high percentage of poor children are permitted to use Title I funds for all children in the school (a "schoolwide" program). The Republican bill would allow ten States and 20 school districts to turn Title I into a per-pupil "portable" program.

Under **S. 2**, students from low-income families who currently receive Title I funds would receive a voucher. Parents could use the voucher for supplemental services at the school the student attends or for supplemental services elsewhere — including a tutorial assistance provider or a private school.

The voucher would attach to eligible students, even if a student moves from his or her public school to a private school or a public school without high concentrations of poverty. In fact, in the majority report on the bill, a group of Republican Senators propose that students use their portability vouchers at the Sylvan Learning Centers, a for-profit company.

During its consideration of **H.R. 2**, the *Student Results Act*, the House considered but did not adopt portable grants.

Why Portable Grants Hurt Public Schools

Portability Drains Resources From Poor Public Schools

Portability vouchers work against public school reform because they take away funding from already inadequately funded schools without reducing costs. These vouchers would take away Federal funding from a school, on a per-pupil basis, though the school would still, with less money, have to fully educate those children. Because Title I funding levels are sufficient to serve only about one-third of eligible students, “portable” grants would result in an immediate and drastic cut in the level and quality of supplementary educational services provided to low-achieving children.

Portability Abandons Disadvantaged Students

Portability would shift the focus of Title I funds away from high-poverty schools, thereby eliminating the guarantee that scarce funds are targeted to students with the greatest need. The Federal Government currently provides supplemental funds to high-poverty schools because research shows that the negative impact of family poverty on educational achievement is much greater in schools with high proportions of poor students. The bill redirects Title I funds to virtually every school district, regardless of poverty.

Districts in the highest poverty quartile currently receive 43 percent of Title I funds, but only 23 percent of State and local funds. **S. 2** would allow States to distribute Title I funds in a way that would create further inequities in spending. The outcome of these grants would be the reduction of substantially targeted Title I funds on disadvantaged students.

Portable Grants Have No Accountability

Portable grants reduce or eliminate accountability for the use of Title I funds. Current law holds schools accountable for improved student

achievement based on disaggregated data. Children receiving portable grants, however, can go to *any* elementary or secondary school — and there is no protection of minimum education standards for these schools. How would a portability system regulate private schools? Unless private schools or tutorial service providers are required to publicly report student achievement data in the same manner as public schools, we would have no information regarding the quality of education in those schools and businesses.

Adopting portable grants is irresponsible because it would send public dollars into “mystery” institutions of questionable quality. Furthermore, allowing a child to take her or his portable grant to a private school would not guarantee a better education.

Portability Undermines Current School Reform Efforts

Title I per pupil expenditure is too low to be meaningful on an individual basis. The current average Title I per pupil expenditure is \$600-650. This level of aid can provide a significant amount of resources and services only if combined to help a substantial number of students in a school. Tying Title I dollars to individual students diminishes the benefits and successes of schoolwide programs and research-based school reform models.

Portability is a retreat from current research. Before 1994, Title I was used to provide pullout, supplemental services and it didn't work. Congress decided to focus Title I on what works – whole school reform. Portability reverses this sensible policy and does nothing to ensure better schools and better results for children.

Portability Creates Enormous Administrative Burdens

Portable grants would disrupt school planning and budgeting, because large numbers of students could change school in the middle of the school year. It would also be difficult to administer because school budgets are usually set far in advance to allow for the extensive planning needed to hire teachers and arrange classes.

Conclusion

Standards-based reform and schoolwide programs, built on the Title I program, are making a significant difference in student achievement. Democrats are working to build on these reforms. Portability would eliminate our Title I focus on the most disadvantaged students. Only more funding, not Title I portable vouchers, will ensure more services to children in public schools.